

# Good news: 'Holiday blues' are beatable

## Help is available to ease seasonal stresses, depression

By Melanie Casey

For many people, the holiday season evokes feelings of joy and optimism and is a time to enjoy family togetherness and celebration. For some, however, the season brings increased stress along with feelings of loneliness and sadness, leading to what is called the "holiday blues."

### Causes and symptoms

The blues are brought on by the increased stress associated with holidays and most commonly appear during December.

Factors such as having guests, financial worries associated with gift giving and entertaining, the inability to be with family members, a sense of increased isolation and loneliness and having unrealistic expectations can contribute to its development.

Symptoms include headaches, the inability to sleep or sleeping too much, increased anxiety, increased or inappropriate feelings of guilt and a diminished ability to concentrate.

One reason may be that "the holidays reconnect us with our childhood experience of family celebrations," said Gayle Peterson, Ph.D, a family therapist. "The holidays bring up our yearnings for family closeness, past and present, imagined or real," she added.

### Diagnosis SAD

There may be more to the holiday blues than just stress, fatigue, unrealistic expectations, financial problems and loneliness. For some people, the holiday blues could be the result of a mood disorder known as Seasonal Affective Disorder.

SAD is caused by a lack of sunlight. More specifically, SAD is caused by an increase in the brain's production of melatonin, a sleep-related hormone produced at higher levels in the dark.

As winter approaches and the days get shorter and darker, some people may experience an increase in their melatonin levels, which could result in SAD.

The symptoms of SAD often mimic those of clinical depression, such as excessive eating and sleeping, weight gain and persistent sadness. However, SAD is marked by *regularly-occurring* depressive symptoms that occur only in the fall and winter months, with a full remission during the spring and summer.

According to the National Mental Health Association, one must have experienced symptoms for at least two years with no non-seasonal depressive episodes to be diagnosed with SAD.

SAD is treated primarily with bright light therapy (known as phototherapy), which has been shown "to suppress the brain's secretion of melatonin ... and many people respond to this treatment," according to information on the National Mental Health Association Web site ([www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)).

Studies have also shown that exposure to natural sunlight (early morning is best) can also be effective in relieving symptoms of SAD.

However, if phototherapy is unsuccessful, an anti-depressive drug may be prescribed.

### Help is available

For those feeling overwhelmed by the holiday blues, local help is available.

One option is to visit the 6th Area Support Group Chaplain's Office on Patch Barracks.

The Chaplain's Office offers free faith-based individual counseling as well as family and marriage counseling and suicide prevention to all military ID cardholders and Department of Defense civilians.

A chaplain is also on call 24 hours a day and can be reached by calling the Patch Barracks military police station at 430-5262/civ. 0711-680-5262.

Marina Palmer, a civilian pastoral care counseling professional who has a master's degree in counseling, recently came on board the Chaplain's office and also offers faith-based counseling.

Pastoral care differs from clinical care in that it is "counseling from a spiritual perspective," said 6th ASG Deputy Staff Chaplain Lt. Col. Keith Wright, who holds degrees in both theology and counseling.

Chaplain's Office counselors take a holistic approach and focus not only on the mind and body, but also on the spirit, he said.

New clients first meet with Palmer, who determines what they want and need. If clients demonstrate signs of clinical depression or another affliction that goes beyond the realm of the Chaplain's office counselors' expertise, the intervening chaplain or Palmer will refer them to the Stuttgart Health Clinic.

"I see our job as being [similar to] a mechanic," Wright said, "I may not know how to fix [the problem], but I can recognize the symptoms."

Chaplain's Office personnel see between five and ten new clients each week — both service members and civilians. "We're the biggest stop-gap measure in the community," Wright said.

To battle holiday stress and beat the blues, Wright suggests being involved in the community. "You're far less likely to be depressed if you're out there Christmas caroling with 50 other people than sitting in your room," he said.

"Giving from yourself to others gives you a sense of accomplishment," he added.

### An array of services

Army Community Service offers a wide array of resources to help battle the blues and get a handle on holiday stress.

Throughout the year, ACS offers preventative services such as free, confidential budget counseling for families and individuals and employment resources for family members.

ACS also provides volunteer opportunities. Volunteering can reduce feelings of isolation and help provide a sense of value, said Nancy Piper, ACS director.

ACS also offers crisis intervention services to provide families an added sense of well-being when the going gets tough. Sometimes parenting concerns can be overwhelming, and taking time out to talk to an expert can be helpful, Piper said.

ACS professionals are available, she said, so don't feel overwhelmed.

To help ease minor seasonal stresses, an expert from the University of Maryland advised not dwelling on the past, but instead creating new and different ways to celebrate the season.

For more information visit [www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

### Tips for easing seasonal stress

- ◆ Consider changing rituals that are empty and replace stale traditions.
- ◆ Allow yourself to feel sad or lonely; these are normal feelings.
- ◆ Keep expectations for the holiday season manageable. Make lists and prioritize.
- ◆ Be realistic about what you can and can't accomplish over the holidays.
- ◆ Do something for someone else, such as volunteering to help others.
- ◆ Try something new — experience the holidays in a new way.
- ◆ Join an activity such as a Christmas caroling group.
- ◆ Enjoy free activities such as driving around to look at holiday decorations.
- ◆ Spend time with people. Reach out and make new friends or contact someone you haven't heard from in a while.
- ◆ Don't dwell on the past.
- ◆ Make a budget and stick to it — financial pressures can significantly increase stress.

source: National Mental Health Association

### Protestant Caroling & Fellowship



■ Dec. 8

■ 7 p.m.

■ Patch Chapel.